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ABSTRACT

A seven day project integrating aging into a fifth grade curriculum with a special emphasis on dance was conducted at Mt. View Elementary School (Omaha, Nebraska). The residency focused on activities that incorporated concepts of aging into lessons dealing with dance, art, music, health education, language, and social studies. Older adults visited the classroom to take part in the activities and the students visited a retirement hotel and a nursing home. Dance was a focal point for the following reasons: (1) it is a lifelong activity that can bring people of all ages together; (2) it incorporates movement, human contact and fun; and (3) creative dance helps people to express themselves in ways other than through speaking and it helps people to overcome inhibitions. The purpose of this project was to put people of different ages in touch with each other--not solely as caregivers to each other, but as equal partners sharing in many aspects of life with a chance to learn and dance together. (Author)

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AGE DOESN'T MATTER: WEAVING DANCE AND AGING INTO A FIFTH GRADE CURRICULUM*

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AGE DOESN'T MATTER: WEAVING DANCE AND AGING INTO A FIFTH GRADE CURRICULUM

Abstract

A seven day project integrating aging into a fifth grade curriculum with a special emphasis on dance was conducted at Mt. View Elementary School. The residency focused on activities that incorporated concepts of aging into lessons dealing with dance, art, music, health education, language, and social studies. Older adults visited the classroom to take part in the activities and the students visited a retirement hotel and a nursing home.

Dance was a focal point for the following reasons:

1) It is a lifelong activity that can bring people of all ages together.
2) It incorporates movement, human contact and fun.
3) Creative dance helps people to express themselves in ways other than through speaking and it helps people to overcome inhibitions.

The purpose of this project was to put people of different ages in touch with each other -- not solely as caregivers to each other, but as equal partners sharing in many aspects of life with a chance to learn and dance together.

A seven day project integrating aging into a fifth grade curriculum with a special emphasis on dance was conducted at Mt. View Elementary School in Omaha, NE. The project was sponsored by the Nebraska Arts Council, the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and the Mt. View Elementary School Parent-Teachers' Organization. Josie Metal-Corbin was the dance Artist-in-the-Schools and Gwyn Barker, an elementary school teacher for 25 five years, was the participating classroom teacher.

The residency focused on activities that incorporated concepts of aging into lessons dealing with dance, art, music, health education, language, and social studies. Older adults visited the classroom to take part in the activities and the fifth grade students also visited a local retirement hotel and a nursing home.

Each day of the residency, the fifth grade students had a modern dance lesson and several times older adults were part of other dance experiences. Dance was a focal point for the project for several reasons.

Dance is a lifelong activity that can bring people of all ages together. It incorporates movement with fun. Dance also affords people the opportunity to make contact with one another. Creative dance helps people to express themselves in ways other than through speaking and it helps people to break down their inhibitions. (Corbin & Metal-Corbin, 1983). Dance helps to fuse the contrived division between mind and body, or as author/physicist Fritjof Capra (1982) suggests, we need: "to 'think' with our bodies" and

"use them as agents of knowing." The creators of this project concur with the words of author George Leonard (1986): "Music and dance, the blending of rhythmic sound with movement, lubricate all learning, and it is tragic that these subjects are considered anything less than basic in our schools."

The art of dance with its creative and expressive powers can provide an environment through which people of all ages can communicate past memories and present feelings. According to Missinne & Lorenzen (1982), older people bring the gift of accumulated years of experience and knowledge of the world and themselves to art. "Potentially, they have the most to say about what it means to be human."

Aging is a part of living, as natural as life itself, yet many people tend to view aging negatively. These stereotypic attitudes are prevalent in the adult population and have also been identified in children.

How children view their own aging appears to have serious implications for society. Children who hold negative attitudes toward aging may disassociate themselves from elderly people.

In view of the fact that over 11 percent of Americans are over age 65 and 13% of the population will be over 65 by the year 2000, it seems critical that our society examines how we are preparing children to adjust to their

own aging and their parents' aging. It is imperative that young people know how to relate positively to those who are older than they are. "The best time to learn about growing old with decency and grace is in youth," according to a study conducted by Gerbner, et.al. (1981) at the Annenburg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania.

The organizers of this project felt that schools should have a role in helping to break down age ghettos and put people of all ages in touch with each other -- not solely as caregivers to each other, but as equal partners sharing in all aspects of life with a chance to learn together. It is not healthy for any generation to live in an age segregated society.

No age group, including older adults, can be neatly categorized. Despite what many younger people may think, old does not necessarily mean frail or decrepit. What matters more than age is how well we take care of what we have and whether or not we have a positive outlook on life.

We have no reason to believe that our society's tendency to segregate the old from the young can do anything but deprive each generation of important pieces of their past and their future. Author Pearl Buck (1967) said: ". . . the child should be taught from the very first that the whole world is his world, that adult and child share one world, that all gererations are needed." Another author, Victoria Secunda (1984) stated that " . . . each generation is required to give its members an ongoing collective sense of worth they cannot get separately."

The intergenerational cooperative program at Mt. View required more than just throwing two or more generations together. In preparation for the actual implementation of this project, the organizers involved parents, community, the principal, librarian, art teacher, and custodian. All of the groundwork began months in advance.

One major aspect of "Age Doesn't Matter" was to provide an opportunity for the children to be exposed to a wide diversity of older adults. The children conducted interviews with older adults and found out that dance was, and still is, a part of many of their lives. When the Sodbusters, a square dance group from Council Bluffs, Iowa came to Mt. View, the students and the Sodbusters quickly learned that one way to bring generations together was to dance together. The differences in ages did not seem to be a barrier to having a good time.

When the Sodbusters were through performing and teaching dances, they requested that the Mt. View students demonstrate the dances that they most enjoy. They were treated to a spontaneous exhibition of breakdancing.

Another highlight of the project was a bus trip to Paxton Manor, a retirement hotel in downtown Omaha. In the words of classroom teacher Gwyn Barker: "They had 'neat' things at the Paxton: an old fashioned roomy ladies' room; an antique barber pole; a ceramics workshop; a ballroom; a billards room; and creaky old elevators. We felt almost adopted."

While at Paxton Manor, the children were entertained by the Paxton Pacers, their goodtime band. The children joined in a sing-along of songs from bygone years. After the singing, old and young participated in some dances in chairs and some parachute play.

The morning activities ended with a demonstration of ancient Chinese dance-like exercises called t'ai chi ch'uan, as demonstrated by one of the residents who had been taking lessons locally.

A main emphasis of the project was to expose the children to a cross-section of older adults. After visiting with healthy, active, independent older adults at Paxton Manor, the students visited Redman Nursing Home where they were reminded that some older people need special care and attention.

Another part of the project involved making masks in art class. The masks were to represent someone they admired or someone they would like to be. Said Mrs. Barker: "Our room became a scrap paper paradise. Noses, ears, mouths, teeth, eyes and lashes appeared like magic. Plastic surgery was done with abandon and creativity. Yarn, cotton, and felt assisted in hair restoration. Our blank masks soon had expression, personality, and unique identities. . . ." they symbolized the project's emphasis on diversity of people of all ages.

The last activity of the residency was a celebration. The dance, art, poetry, and journal entries that had taken place throughout the week were performed, displayed or

presented to each other and to the guest of honor Aunt Sally Williams--who was 100 years old.

The end of the celebration was a dance "obstacle course" that incorporated the masks and many of the dance movements and dance vocabulary that the children had learned in the modern dance aspect of the project.

Through interacting and dancing with older people, the children at Mt. View learned that older people are "Fountains of Information"--of history, of life, and of what growing old means to them.

It became apparent that youth had much to gain from interacting with older people, but it was equally apparent that youth also had much to teach.

Although evidence of the success of this project is strictly testimonial at this time, the reactions of both young and old participants were so positive that a one year follow-up is being conducted on the students in this project and a longer residency at another elementary school has been completed in which a multi-perspective content analysis is currently underway.

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